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Comparing the Effectiveness of Video News Releases
and Written News Releases

By
Art Keegan

A Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the
Master of Arts Degree in the Graduate Division of Rowan University
April 28, 1998

Approved by

Professor

Date Approved 4/28/98

ABSTRACT

Arthur I. Keegan

Comparing the Effectiveness of Video News Releases and Written News Releases.
1998

Dr. Estelle Resnik

Public Relations Graduate Program at Rowan University

The purpose of this study was to determine if Video News Releases (VNRs) are more effective than written news releases in offering reportable news to television newsroom decision-makers. To answer this question, 45 television newsroom decision-makers from 13 states and the District of Columbia were surveyed. The survey was conducted over the telephone and presented nine questions to decision-makers regarding their usage and storage of VNRs and written news releases. Decision-makers were identified as television news personnel knowledgeable in the usage rate and storage length of VNRs and written news releases.

The study analyzed the responses of all the newsroom decision-makers surveyed, then separated the responses into two segments, larger and smaller media markets. The larger media markets were ranked in the nation's top 25 largest media markets and the smaller were ranked below the top 25 media markets.

The most significant finding was that 65% of the newsroom decision-makers surveyed reported that written news releases are used more often than VNRs in news broadcasts. Survey respondents in both larger and smaller media markets reported little usage of VNRs in news broadcasts. Worth noting is these respondents offer a very small

percentage of the habits and opinions of all the television newsroom decision-makers in the country.

MINI-ABSTRACT

Arthur I. Keegan

Comparing the Effectiveness of Video News Releases and Written News Releases.

1998

Dr. Estelle Resnik

Public Relations Graduate Program at Rowan University

Are Video News Releases more effective than written news releases in offering reportable news? Forty-five television newsroom decision-makers from around the country were surveyed to answer this question. With some citing time as an issue, 65% reported that written news releases are used more often in news broadcasts than VNRs.

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CHAPTER I

Introduction and Elements of Debate

Public relations is a profession that continues to change with the technological advances of society. One of these advances is the use of Video News Releases (VNRs). In some instances, VNRs have made the use of the traditional written news release obsolete.

A VNR is a 30 to 90 second videotape of promotional information developed by an organization and sent to television news outlets. The videos are usually out-sourced to a public relations video production company and sent in beta cassette form or transmitted via satellite to television news outlets.

VNRs are produced, packaged and sent to television news outlets in various forms. The “B-roll” is a VNR with roughly edited videotape that provides the television newsroom decision-maker more flexibility in its use. The “B-roll” offers generic shots of a facility or product with the film usually filed for future use at the news organization’s discretion. The “A-roll” VNR is sent totally edited, offering less flexibility for the gatekeeper.

VNRs are also used in Satellite Media Tours (SMTs). According to Douglas Simon, the process of conducting an SMT begins when a company produces a “B-roll” package. The company then alerts the news outlet of the availability of the VNR and an interview with a company spokesperson. The VNR is sent about one week prior to the possible interview.¹

¹ Simon, Douglas. “VNR/SMT packages are a hot PR tool.” Public Relations Quarterly 41, (winter, 1996): 36.

The station can then pull the VNR off satellite and decide whether or not to conduct an interview. The spokesperson conducts a “tour” by bringing the news outlet into the facility via satellite and explaining the information the company is trying to convey. The spokesperson can answer questions about the company, a new product or service. SMTs take a VNR one step further by offering not only information but also the insight of a company spokesperson and a visual “tour” of the facility or product.

The history of VNRs dates back to the late 1940’s when creative practitioners offered video footage of things, places or events that television news departments were unable to cover. Even though the content would be considered too commercial by today’s standard, it was the first effort to reach the public through the media with videotape. VNRs were a good idea whose time had not yet come, as the process proved too difficult and costly, and the trend submerged for 30 years. VNRs made a comeback in the late 1970’s but were used only by the upper-most crust of corporate America and remained impractical to others.² Today, technology has made VNRs a commonly used tool by public relations practitioners trying to reach a target audience through the media.

The written news release is the most common practice for public relations practitioners seeking to publicize an event or product for their organization or company. To be used in a news broadcast, a VNR must follow the same standards as the written news release in being newsworthy and timely. If not, the cost of a VNR would be wasted with the results ending up in the trash like so many ill-fated written news releases. Supporters of VNRs claim VNRs are the latest and most advanced trend in publicizing an organization to news outlets. Quite simply, VNRs are to television what press releases

² “The Moving Picture” (1990, October 2). Adweek’s Marketing Week, 30 (1990): 14.

are to newspapers. Supporters also claim VNRs are a quicker and more efficient method of contacting as many news outlets as possible.

For example, StarKist Seafood Company produced a VNR to publicize their first batch of “dolphin safe” tunafish. This VNR reached 81.2 million viewers across the country as approximately 200 stations offered the story in some form.³ Supporters also note the cost of that particular VNR was most likely less expensive than the \$100,000 it would have cost to produce and place a one-minute prime-time television advertisement.⁴

VNRs have a one-month life span, meaning if a VNR is going to be used, it will be used within the first month of distribution.⁵ While some would question the significance of the content of a month-old VNR, VNR producers are anxious just to have the coverage. Medialink, the world’s largest distributor of public relations videos, claims a nationally distributed VNR will be viewed by at least 1.5 to 2.5 million viewers.⁶

Supporters of VNRs also mention VNRs are an effective method for companies to reach viewers without adhering to Federal Trade Commission regulations. For example, Jim Beam Company distributed a VNR regarding the use of American grain in their bourbon product. Whereas it is illegal to advertise liquor products on television, the slant of using American grain in their product got the company airtime it would not have been able to attain through legal advertising.⁷

Written news releases are often discredited by members of the media because they lack a local angle, are not timely or newsworthy. VNRs have fallen under similar

³ Sonenclar, Bob. “The VNR top ten: how much video PR gets on the evening news?” Columbia Journalism Review 29 (1991): 14.

⁴ Davis, S.E. “Prefab News.” Technology Review 92 (1992): 6-8.

⁵ Orr, Diane. “Incorporating VNRs into your public relations program.” Public Relations Quarterly 39 (1994): 22-25.

⁶ Ibid., p. 23.

⁷ “Making News.” Consumer Reports Oct, 1996: 694.

criticism and have been disparaged by news producers calling the VNRs they receive “false news”, “controlled news” and “selective viewing.” This is because many companies offer VNRs with a slanted viewpoint that lacks objectivity. Newsroom decision-makers have indicated this leads to a compromise in the credibility of news content.

Critics of the VNR allude to the high cost of producing, packaging, distributing and tracking of a VNR. The average VNR costs between \$5,000 and \$25,000 to produce and distribute with no guarantee it will be used by a gatekeeper in a news broadcast.⁸ Critics claim it is difficult to find a VNR producer who has connections with satellite companies and news organizations. Furthermore, many newsroom decision-makers complain of an influx of overly commercial and useless VNRs being sent to their station.

VNRs are another form of prepackaged news that many news outlets have become dependent upon. One study found 70% of television news content is focused on pre-planned events.⁹ In “How to Manage TV News,” Joe Saltzman writes, “TV stations don’t originate much news. They’re parasites. If the wire machine broke down, they’d be out on their asses. They select from staged source material usually furnished by public and private relations people, by government and military sources.”¹⁰ Although Saltzman wrote these words in 1979, which may make his words outdated, it expresses his opinion of how television newsroom decision-makers, in general, gather and develop news stories.

⁸ Shell, Adam. “VNRs: who’s watching? How do you know?” Public Relations Journal 49, (1993): 14.

⁹ Smith, Robert. “Mythic Elements in Television News.” Journal of Communication, 29 (1979): 14.

¹⁰ Saltzman, Joe. “How to Manage TV News.” Human Behavior 65 (1979): 65. (From Cameron, Glen. T. and Blount, David. “VNRs and Air Checks: A Content Analysis of the Use of Video News Releases in Television Newscasts.” Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly, 73 (1997): 893.)

According to Nielsen Media Research, 5000 VNRs were distributed to television stations in 1996. Furthermore, according to Nielsen Media Research, 100% of television stations use VNRs in broadcasts.¹¹ Another study of news producers detected a sharp increase in the usage of VNRs. In 1988, 83% of those polled used VNRs in their news broadcasts. This total rose to 86% in 1990 and increased again in 1992 to 100%.¹²

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to analyze whether Video News Releases (VNRs) are an effective method of offering reportable news or an expensive alternative to the conventional written news release. Research indicates VNRs are a controversial trend in the public relations profession with as many opponents as proponents. This study will enable public relations practitioners decide if VNRs are a more suitable vehicle than written news releases for their particular strategy.

Need for this study

Obviously, statistics of VNR usage prove VNRs are a popular and controversial trend in the public relations industry. Furthermore, they are a viable option for companies to consider using when seeking to publicize a new product, service, event or viewpoint. Previous studies conducted by West Glen Communications, Inc. and Nielsen Media Research on behalf of Medialink, surveyed news directors regarding the use of VNRs. However, the author has not found any survey, including those noted, of news directors' or other newsroom decision-makers' opinions directly comparing the use of VNRs to written news releases. Therefore, the current study will reveal attitudes and opinions of newsroom decision-makers towards VNRs that have not yet been revealed by a previous

¹¹ "Making News", p. 694.

¹² Sonenclar, p. 14.

study. This is an important study because it will help public relations practitioners create better strategy for media relations. Knowing whether newsroom decision-makers prefer VNRs or written news releases can only help practitioners plan an effective strategy in communicating with the media. It would also assist in getting their message on the media agenda because the practitioner would know what form the gatekeepers want information presented.

Procedure

The current study will try to identify the percentage of VNRs that are eventually aired in news telecasts. News producers will also be asked to estimate the percentage of news releases used in news telecasts. This will be done through a quantitative study of news producers who will be asked to answer telephone survey questions. The author will attempt to interview 75 newsroom decision-makers in this study. This survey will provide the data needed to answer the proposed question regarding the utilization of VNRs compared to written news releases.

Limitations

Although 75 newsroom decision-makers represent a small segment of the habits and opinions of all the newsroom decision-makers in the country, it might offer some insight to the habits and opinions of all newsroom decision-makers. Furthermore, time and resource restrictions would render it impossible to conduct a survey of all the newsroom decision-makers in the country.

Hypothesis

The author's tentative hypothesis is that VNRs are a useful, if not essential, vehicle for public relations practitioners to consider using to promote their organization.

The author's study will support the notion that VNRs are worth the price of producing, packaging, distributing and tracking. This study will reveal that written news releases remain a basic ingredient in a public relations strategy, but are a less effective tool than VNRs. VNRs are an important vehicle for gaining publicity that a practitioner must consider if his or her company can afford the production, packaging, distribution and tracking of a VNR.

While VNRs and written news releases share a common goal of gaining publicity, the author will support the belief that VNRs are a more effective means than written news releases of reaching the public through television newsroom gatekeepers. The current study will reveal VNRs are more useful than written news releases because they offer the same, if not more, information plus a visual element not provided in written news releases.

Definition of terms

VNRs – Video News Releases.

“B-roll” – Roughly edited footage providing television news producers flexibility. “B-rolls” are usually filed and used at the gatekeeper's discretion.

“A-roll” – VNR sent fully edited by the VNR producer offering less flexibility for the news producer than a “B-roll”.

SMTs – Satellite Media Tours.

Medialink – New York based company that is the world's largest distributor of public relations videos.

CHAPTER II

A Review of Related Studies

As technology in society advanced in the 1980's, the written news release was ushered aside by some public relations practitioners who could instead afford to package Video News Releases (VNRs) for promotional purposes. There is open debate in the public relations industry if this change from the conventional written news release to the VNR was a change for the better. This chapter is a review of the literature found in studies conducted relating to the use of VNRs and written news releases by television newsroom decision-makers in news broadcasts. This chapter also reviews the poignant information obtained from 20 journal articles researched. Many of these articles offer the opinions of people in the public relations and journalism professions who question the credibility of VNRs. The articles focused on many aspects of VNRs, namely, cost, length, and content. More importantly, many journals quoted professionals in the field of public relations openly questioning the significance of VNRs as a news source.

Previous studies

Nielsen Media Research on behalf of Medialink conducted the most important previous research relating to the use of VNRs. This six-question survey was presented in a nationwide telephone survey of 110 television newsroom decision-makers. According to the survey, each of the decision-makers stated their station does use VNRs in newscasts. This was important to the current study because it established the validity and popularity of the use of VNRs in television newscasts. Furthermore, Medialink's survey suggested a rise in the usage of VNRs in news broadcasts. However, the remaining five questions of the survey did not involve the decision-makers' use of written news releases

in television newscasts. The questions inquire about the preferred method of obtaining VNRs, namely satellite, mail/cassette or if the decision-maker had no preference.¹ Other questions presented to the decision-makers regarded their preference in the editing, length, notification time and narration of VNRs.

West Glen Communications also conducted a study of the reception of VNRs in the newsroom. Six hundred television news stations were mailed a survey on the topic of VNR usage. This study was called, "The 1997 Survey of Newsrooms on the Use of Outside Produced Video."² It was sent to the television news stations via mail, and yielded responses by 82 television news stations, a 14% return. Similar to the survey conducted by Nielsen Media Research on behalf of Medialink, the study did not directly question newsroom decision-makers about their preference of written news releases to VNRs, or vice versa. The findings of this study mirrored the survey of Medialink by predicting an increase in the usage of VNRs in newscasts. More than 90% of the television stations surveyed indicated they use outside produced videos for newscasts. Furthermore, 28% of the stations surveyed plan on using more of the VNRs and B-roll packages in the future. However, 20% reported a decrease in the use of VNRs and B-roll packages. This lends credence to the use of VNRs by public relations practitioners seeking to gain publicity for their companies.

The West Glenn Communications survey also revealed how many VNRs television news stations received each day. Eighty-two percent received 10 or fewer

¹ "Results from a nationwide telephone survey of 110 TV newsroom decision makers by Nielsen Media Research on behalf of Medialink." Medialink Communications (1997) On-line Internet, Nov. 19, 1997. Available: @medialink.com (Mary Buhey).

² Walker, Jerry. "TV newsrooms prefer 'low tech' pitches." O'Dwyer's PR Service Report (November 1997) 74.

VNRs each day. Furthermore, 61% of the stations surveyed used between 10% and 20% of the VNRs received in newscasts.

In “Video News Releases: Effects on Viewer Recall and Attitudes,” Owen and Karrh measured the effectiveness of a company’s message when presented in a news broadcast via a VNR as opposed to advertising. A study of 81 undergraduate marketing students concluded viewers gave more credibility to a VNR based message in a news broadcast than to a “similarly structured” message in an advertisement. The authors concluded that “viewers assign significantly more credibility to VNR-based messages than to advertisements.”³

Controversy in field

Although popular with some public relations practitioners seeking to publicize a new product, service, event or viewpoint, VNRs remain a controversial topic in the public relations profession. The most controversy lies in the question of their content. Some television newsroom decision-makers believe VNRs are inappropriate for newscasts because many of the VNRs they receive offer a slanted view or content that is not newsworthy. Owen and Karrh offer insight into this mistrust.⁴ “Some television news directors would sooner admit to insider trading than to extensive use of VNR’s. Several news executives reportedly refuse to use VNRs presumably because they feel their news organization’s credibility may be eroded.”⁵

3 Karrh, James A. & Owen, Anne R. “Video News Releases: Effects on Viewer Recall and Attitudes.” Public Relations Review 22, (winter, 1996) 369.

⁴ Ibid., 369.

⁵ Ibid., 369.

In “A Beginner’s Guide to VNR’s”, Nick Peters, Vice President of Operations for Medialink, provides reasoning for producing a VNR. “A VNR seen in the context of a TV newscast offers credibility not afforded by commercials,” writes Peters. “A VNR can help position your company as the authority on a certain topic, issue or industry.”⁶ Peters’ thoughts of establishing credibility are debated by the news media.

Todd Gitlin, a sociologist at the University of California at Berkeley, reinforced the notion that VNRs are at times not newsworthy. “It’s appalling,” says Gitlin, who calls the use of VNRs, “on the slope to accepting someone else’s prefab news blip.”⁷

“You see footage of a nursing home and it may seem like Little Miss Mary having a good time,” said Mark Bakst, a video producer at Lorain Community College in Ohio, “but you don’t get to see how they neglect her the rest of the time.”⁸

Even proponents of VNRs admit there has been “unethical behavior in the industry.”⁹ Carolyn Okin, director of media relations for Ketchum Public Relations adds, “There has been some unethical activity in the industry – when VNRs have not been honest with their message.”¹⁰

This unethical activity has led some television news producers to question the content of the VNRs they receive. Cameron and Blount allude to this mistrust in their article, “VNR Air Checks: A Content Analysis of the use of Video News Releases in Television Newscasts.” Cameron and Blount write, “Clearly, news stations use VNRs,

⁶ Peters, Nick. “A Beginner’s Guide to VNRs.” Public Relations Journal 49 (Dec. 1993) 16.

⁷ Davis, Susan E. “Prefab News” Technology Review 92 (Oct. 1992) 6.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 6

⁹ “Making News.” Consumer Reports 56 (Oct. 1991) 694.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 694.

but mistrust of public relations probably motivates the journalist to edit outside material provided by public relations sources.”¹¹

This mistrust has led some television news personnel to question the methods of companies trying to gain valuable television exposure through the use of VNRs. Mark Richardson of Oakland’s KTVU wonders aloud if firms use VNRs, “as an alternative to talking to reporters.”¹²

David Dross, Chairman-CEO of Ketchum Public Relations offers his opinions of the duties and responsibilities of public relations firms in “Monday Memmo”, presented in Broadcasting. “Honorable public relations practitioners do their jobs and represent their organizations openly and forthrightly, with the understanding we work in the best interest of our companies and our clients. As public relations practitioners, we serve as facilitators, helping journalists by providing them with usable and credible VNRs and B-roll, background information and contacts.”¹³ As stated, this opinion is often debated by the recipients of this information in the media.

The fact remains that it is the news editor’s responsibility to edit and use those VNRs that are newsworthy while discarding the VNRs that are not. Just as a newspaper editor would discard or edit and use a press release, it is the television newsroom decision-maker’s responsibility to do the same with VNRs. “There’s nobody out there who won’t use a VNR when they consider it real news. The challenge is making it look like real news, rather than the commercial that some clients want,” says Dan Johnson,

¹¹ Cameron, Glen T. & Blount, David. “VNRs & Air Checks: A Content Analysis of the use if Video News Releases in Television Newscasts.” Journal & Mass Communication Quarterly 73 (winter, 1996) 890.

¹² “Prefab News”, 6.

president of DWJ Television in Ridgewood, NJ.¹⁴

Journalistic responsibility of VNR editing and usage is also discussed in Abbot & Brassfield's article, "Comparing Decisions of Releases by TV and Newspaper Gatekeepers." Abbot and Brassfield refer to a study completed by Louise Margaret Benjamin in her unpublished thesis titled, "An analysis of the gatekeeping function of a television news producer." Benjamin writes that television news producers consider timeliness, human interest and proximity as the most important news values in story selection. Abbot and Brassfield write that when the time comes for a news producer to use or discard a VNR, it will fall under the same scrutiny as a written news release.¹⁵ If the VNR can offer any or all of the listed news elements, it is considered newsworthy. Therefore, VNRs and written news releases compete on a level playing field in vying for exposure in television newscasts because they are scrutinized by the same standards.

Mark Harmon reinforces this notion of fair competition between VNRs and written news releases in "Mr. Gates Goes Electronic: The What And Why Questions in Local TV News." Harmon writes, "Any analysis of local television news gatekeeping must begin with the traditionalist approach such as proximity, timeliness, or consequence."¹⁶ Both VNRs and written news releases must abide by these rules in order to gain coverage on a news broadcast.

Professional discretion is also noted in Eugene Marlow's article in Public Relations Journal titled, "Sophisticated 'news' videos gain wide acceptance." Marlow

¹³ Drobis, David. "Monday Memmo" Broadcasting 12 (August 24, 1992) 17.

¹⁴ Greenburg, Elliot. "Video News Releases with a twist make news." Public Relations Journal 50 (Aug-Sep. 1994) 23.

¹⁵ Abbot, Eric A. & Brassfield, Lynn T. "Comparing Decisions on Releases By TV and Newspaper Gatekeepers." Journalism Quarterly 66 (winter 1989) 853.

¹⁶ Harmon, Mark "Mr. Gates Goes Electronic: The What And Why Questions in Local TV News." Journalism Quarterly. 857.

agrees that television news producers make the final decision in what goes in the news broadcast and what does not. Furthermore, he writes, VNRs are at an advantage to written news releases because they offer a visual element. "Press releases and various printed materials often don't have the same immediacy or visual affect as something that you can see on television," says Elizabeth Parkinson, a producer with Edelman Public Relations Worldwide. "So it's a very logical step for companies to put their message into some visual form."¹⁷

Taking advantage of the visual advantage becomes more crucial when there is a crisis situation for a company. For example, StarKist Seafood Company was criticized by environmental groups for their method in capturing tuna. The environmental groups claimed StarKist were sacrificing dolphins in their pursuit of capturing tunafish. StarKist produced a VNR highlighting its "dolphin-safe" method of catching tunafish, which posed no threat to the welfare of dolphins. This VNR was seen in some form by 82 million viewers and ended a possible crisis situation for StarKist.¹⁸ StarKist's VNR was the most popular VNR of the 1990's to date according to Medialink.¹⁹ Larry Foster of Johnson & Johnson cites that 50% of Americans claim television news is their primary source of information.²⁰ If this is true, and viewers give more credence to the content of a news broadcast than an advertisement, this supports the value of a broadcasted VNR.

Another area of debate is the cost of producing, packaging and tracking a VNR. While there is no debate that the production cost alone ranges from \$5,000 to \$20,000,

¹⁷ Marlow, Eugene. "Sophisticated 'news' videos gain wide acceptance." Public Relations Journal 50 (Aug-Sep 1994) 19.

¹⁸ "Making News", 18.

¹⁹ Sonenclar, Bob. "The VNR Top Ten." Columbia Journalism Review 29 (March-April 1991) 14.

²⁰ "The Moving Picture Show." Adweek's Marketing Week 30 (Oct. 1989) 16.

there is debate whether VNR production, packaging and tracking is worthwhile.²¹ In “VNRs – who’s watching? How do you know?”, Adam Shell claims companies hired to track a VNRs’ success rate have not been totally reliable.²² Shell accuses the tracking companies of creating a “false impression” of the success of VNRs. He cites unscientific tracking methods as the source of his argument. Shell writes that tracking codes embedded in VNRs are sometimes erased by television news producers who are editing the content of a VNR. This leads tracking companies to use phone calls and reply cards to calculate the success of a VNR. The tracking methods, according to Shell, are inaccurate and lead to a question in the authenticity of the results. Shell’s opinion about erroneous calculations of VNR trackers is supported in a Public Relations Journal article titled, “VNR Update: Facts versus Fiction.” The article reads, “For the many suppliers who strive to produce accurate usage reports, definitive monitoring remains a major problem, largely because getting and verifying the information from stations is so difficult.”²³

Proponents of VNRs say much of the skepticism towards VNRs coming out of the television newsroom comes from the fact that VNRs take advantage of the staffing cuts experienced at television news stations. A study conducted by the Radio-TV News Directors Association reported a 7% decrease in the news staffs of the television news stations in the top 25 markets in the United States in the year preceding the study.²⁴ The study claims this void in personnel resources made stations obtain information through VNRs that they would not have been able to report themselves. This trend is more

²¹ Orr, Diane. “Incorporating VNRs into your public relations program.” Public Relations Quarterly 39 (Spring 1994) 22.

²² Shell, Adam. “VNR’s –who’s watching? How do you know?” Public Relations Journal 49 (Dec. 1993) 19.

²³ “VNR Update: fact versus fiction.” Public Relations Journal 45 (Dec. 1989) 23.

²⁴ “The Moving Picture Show”, 14.

evident in smaller markets. “It is an industry platitude that resource constraints force more extensive use of VNRs,” write Cameron and Blount. “In a smaller market or smaller stations with less personnel, time becomes an important factor.”²⁵ Receiving a prepackaged news item is much more time-effective than sending a cameraman and reporter to a particular location. In essence, VNR producers believe they are only filling a void created by the downsizing of television news personnel.

Evaluation of existing research

The articles reviewed for this study on the usage of VNRs consistently included criticism of VNRs within the public relations industry. The opposition usually questioned the value of the content of VNRs. In contrast, the studies conducted by Medialink and West Glen Communications offered a more accepting view of VNRs in the television newsroom. This was probably due to the fact that Medialink and West Glen Communications are two of the leading producers of outside-produced videos. Their financial well being is based on producing, packaging and tracking of VNRs. In fact, Medialink is the world’s leading distributor of public relations videos. Since these companies offer the services of producing VNRs, it makes sense they have more favorable opinions of VNRs than television newsroom decision-makers. There were no surveys conducted that questioned television newsroom decision-makers about the content of VNRs. Furthermore, there was no study conducted on the use of written news releases in television newscasts.

The study conducted by Owen and Karrh was significant because it concluded that the viewers they surveyed gave more credibility to a VNR-based message in a news

²⁵ “VNR Air Checks: A Content Analysis of the use of Video News Releases in Television Newscasts”, 893.

broadcast than to a “similarly structured” advertisement. This offers objective support for the use of VNRs because a company that produces VNRs did not conduct the study. However, the study did not directly compare the use of VNRs versus written news releases in television newscasts. While it did conclude that VNRs are an effective public relations tool, the study did not focus on the opinions and behaviors of television newsroom decision-makers.

Relationship of the study to other works

As stated, the current study will differ from the other studies conducted by West Glen Communications and Nielsen Media Research on behalf of Medialink. The current study will ask newsroom decision-makers if VNRs are a more effective tool than written news releases in offering reportable news. It would not be expected of the mentioned companies to research this question. This would undermine their livelihood. However, the review of journal articles reveals a trend in the skepticism of the use of VNRs in newsrooms. Therefore, a survey directly questioning newsroom decision-makers about the effectiveness of VNRs versus written news releases is necessary. The results of the survey could assist public relations practitioners preparing a strategy to contact the media.

CHAPTER III

Procedures

The study was designed to determine if Video News Releases (VNRs) are a more effective tool than written news releases for public relations practitioners to use when trying to gain television coverage for their company. Forty-five television newsroom decision-makers were the respondents to a nine-question survey in this study. Although they represent a small percentage of all the newsroom decision-makers in the country, their opinions offered a perspective of the reception and usage of VNRs and written news releases in television newsrooms.

The data needed to answer this controversial question was found in the preferences of television newsroom decision-makers. Decision-makers were people knowledgeable in the usage and storage practices of their station pertaining to VNRs and written news releases. This group of gatekeepers was a critical segment of the media to question because they designate what is used in television newscasts.

The first step in answering the designated question was to locate the names and phone numbers of television stations offering news broadcasts in the United States. This information is available in the 1997 edition of International Television & Video Almanac, a publication that lists the names, addresses and telephone numbers of television stations throughout the country. Although this publication does not offer the names of the decision-makers, a phone call was placed to identify the decision-makers at each station contacted, thus leading to the opportunity to interview the source.

Survey preparation

Before the survey was presented to the decision-makers, the survey questions were reviewed and refined by an individual with over 30 years' experience in radio and television. The survey was presented to 45 television newsroom decision-makers.

Source selection

Sources were selected based on availability, namely television newsroom decision-makers from larger markets and smaller media markets that could afford the time to answer the survey. It was impractical to contact each decision-maker in the United States. According to the International Television & Video Almanac, there are over 1500 television stations in the United States, U.S Territories & Possessions, Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands. This restriction did not allow the documentation of the opinions and behaviors of every newsroom decision-maker in the United States, thus leading to a question of reliability in the results. However, offering the opinions and behaviors of 45 newsroom decision-makers, which represents approximately 3% of the stations in the United States, posed as a model for the overall opinions and judgements of all television newsroom decision-makers.

Each decision-maker contacted was asked to answer the survey over the telephone. It was anticipated that more than one phone call would be needed to coordinate a convenient time for a telephone survey in 75% of the cases. A telephone survey was used because previous research indicates a faxed or mailed survey is less likely to be answered. Therefore, a telephone interview was a more reliable instrument for research than a questionnaire sent to the decision-maker with hopes it would be completed and returned. One segment of the decision-makers interviewed worked in larger media

markets, for example, Philadelphia, Washington D.C., and Los Angeles. However, it was equally important to document the habits and opinions of decision-makers in smaller media markets. Therefore, decision-makers in smaller media markets such as Allentown, Harrisburg and Palm Springs, CA were also contacted. There were 22 smaller media market television stations contacted and 25 larger market television stations contacted. The larger media markets were ranked in the top 25 media markets in the United States, and the smaller markets had a national media ranking of 26 and smaller.

Instrument

The instrument for research was a nine-question survey presented to television newsroom decision-makers. A copy of the questionnaire appears in the sole Appendix of this document. Decision-makers were asked if they agree or disagree that VNRs are a more effective tool than written news releases in offering reportable news. They were then asked if the content of VNRs is used more consistently than written news releases in television news broadcasts. The decision-makers surveyed were also asked to approximate how many VNRs and written news releases they receive in an average week's time, and how many they use in television news broadcasts. Other questions asked how long they normally keep VNRs and written news releases on file for possible future usage. They were asked if they use the full content or just a small segment of VNRs, or if they don't use VNRs at all in television news broadcasts. This question was important because it addressed the issue of justifying the expense of producing, packaging and tracking VNRs.

Depending on the questions, surveyed decision-makers had between three and five responses after each question. For example, the first survey statement read, "VNRs are

more effective than written news releases in offering reportable news.” From this statement, the respondent had five choices from which to select an answer. The five selections were 1) I strongly agree, 2) I agree, 3) I disagree, 4) I strongly disagree and 5) No opinion. The survey also included questions asking decision-makers to put an actual number on the total number of VNRs and written news releases received in an average week’s time. They were also asked how many of the VNRs and written news releases received are actually used in television news broadcasts. These survey questions offered four responses, namely, 1) 0-5, 2) 6-10, 3) 11-15 or 4) 16 or more. When asked if they use a small segment, or “wrap”, of most VNRs or the full content, decision-makers could select from the following three responses: 1) A small segment, 2) Full content or 3) Don’t use VNRs.

Data collection and evaluation

The data gathered from the survey was recorded by hand as the interviews were conducted. Upon completion of the interview, the data were reviewed and compiled with responses from other interviews. A calculator was used to calculate the percentages of responses provided for each answer. With the use of a personal computer, results were then organized to form a chart listing the responses. Each chart identifies the question and the percentage of the answers. More importantly, the results are further analyzed by drawing a comparison between the opinions and habits of decision-makers in larger and smaller media markets.

Variables

One variable in the study was the differing responses between television newsroom decision-makers in larger and smaller media markets. This is important because the usage

of VNRs differs between decision-makers in smaller and larger media outlets. The size of the media market a decision-maker works in is the independent variable because it dictates the presumed cause in the relationship between the usage of VNRs and written news releases. Previous research has documented that decision-makers in smaller media markets are more likely to use VNRs than decision-makers in larger media markets because of financial and staff limitations.¹

The information gathered in this survey was used to formulate a summary of the results, conclusions and recommendations useful to public relations practitioners.

¹ Cameron, Glen T. & Blount, David. "VNRs and Air Checks: A Content Analysis of the Use of Video News Releases in Television Newscasts." Journalism & Mass Communications Quarterly 73 (Winter 1996) 893.

CHAPTER IV

Data Analysis

The purpose of this survey is to answer the proposed question, “Are Video News Releases more effective than written news releases in offering reportable news?” Written news releases are the most popular method for a public relations practitioner to use in promoting an event, product or stance on an issue. However, technology has made it possible for companies to also present these messages in the form of a video. These videos are called Video News Releases, or VNRs. Since their introduction to mainstream public relations in the 1970’s, VNRs have become a permanent fixture in the public relations industry.

There is controversy in the public relations profession whether VNRs are a more effective tool than written news releases in offering reportable news or just an expensive alternative. While some VNRs have produced successful results, with the most popular reaching as many as 82 million viewers, many decision-makers in television newsrooms have criticized the content of VNRs for being biased and not newsworthy.

The people receiving VNRs are the decision-makers in the newsrooms at television stations around the country. Their titles vary from news producer and assignment desk editor to other functions in the newsroom. VNR distributors do not discriminate among which television news stations receive VNRs. They solicit stations in larger and smaller media markets. VNRs have become just another form of information that must pass through a gatekeeper before it reaches the public.

The survey in this study was designed to gather information that could lead to an analysis of the opinions and behaviors of news producers in both larger and smaller

media markets in the United States. However, the survey was presented to people operating the news desk as well as television news producers. Those surveyed were labeled “decision-makers”, meaning they decide what information that comes into the newsroom is used in a news broadcast. Each group of decision-makers surveyed had a function in the gatekeeping process.

Forty-five decision-makers in television newsrooms from 13 states and the District of Columbia were surveyed. The stations in the largest media markets surveyed were located in Los Angeles and Philadelphia, number two and four in national media market ranking. The stations in the smallest markets were Palm Springs and Bridgeport, CT, which have market rankings in the United States of 159 and 158 respectively. The original goal was to survey 75 newsroom decision-makers. However a low response rate of 19% (45 responses out of 235 phone calls) made it difficult to achieve the desired number of responses. Therefore, 45 responses were recorded and used to calculate results. It should be noted that the 45 television newsroom decision-makers surveyed in this study represent a very small percentage of all the newsroom decision-makers in the United States. Therefore, the results of this survey do not represent the overall opinions and behaviors of all the newsroom decision-makers in the United States.

The sample selected were decision-makers employed at television stations that offered a news program within the United States and had a network affiliation. The network affiliations were ABC, NBC, CBS and Fox.

Group selection

This survey was conducted over the telephone. The telephone numbers of television stations were located in the 1997 International Television & Video Almanac. The first

plan was to have Philadelphia as the geographical starting point of the research, and move westward to Western Pennsylvania, south to Baltimore, north to New York City and continue in each direction until the survey was complete. However, it was difficult to contact a newsroom decision-maker at a time convenient for a brief interview. Those surveyed indicated that people in television newsrooms are constantly working under the pressure of a deadline. Therefore, the best time to hold a telephone survey was to contact a decision-maker in a television newsroom directly after the news was aired. That puts them farthest away from their next deadline. This development meant that a change in strategy was necessary. The change in strategy was to contact television newsroom decision-makers all over the country.

The results of the survey were categorized in three segments. The first group of results includes the reported behaviors of all the newsroom decision-makers surveyed. The results of the survey were then separated by the national media market ranking of the station the respondent worked in to compare the behaviors of newsroom decision-makers in larger and smaller media markets. The larger media markets had a market ranking between one and 25 while the smaller media markets had a market ranking of 26 and larger. The larger media markets represented in this study were Sacramento, CA (20), Cleveland, OH (13), Washington D.C. (7), Philadelphia, PA (4), Minneapolis, MN (14), Denver, CO (18), Los Angeles, CA (2), Tampa, FL (15), Phoenix, AZ (17), Scranton, PA (22), Baltimore, MD (23), and Pittsburgh, PA (19). The smaller media markets represented in this survey are Palm Springs, CA (159), Johnstown, PA (95), Wilkes-Barre, PA (47), Altoona, PA (90), Erie, PA (142), Harrisburg, PA (44), Syracuse, NY (68), Jacksonville, FL (52), Rochester, NY (75), Bakersfield, CA (131), Fresno, CA (55),

Cincinnati, OH (29), San Diego, CA (26), Salt Lake City, UT (35), Richmond, VA (54), Charlotte, NC (28), Bridgeport, CT (158), and Tucson, AZ (71).

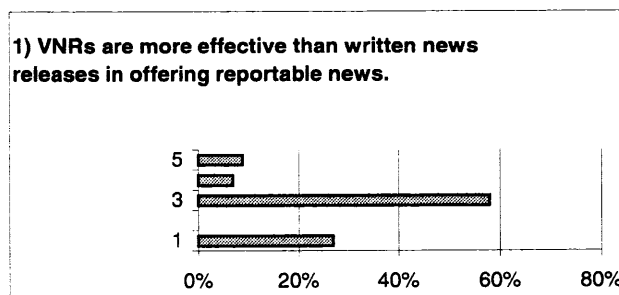
Summary of results

There were 45 television newsroom decision-makers at 45 separate television stations surveyed. The survey opened with a statement; “VNRs are more effective than written news releases in offering reportable news.” The decision-maker could select from five responses: 1) Agree, 2) Strongly agree, 3) Disagree, 4) Strongly disagree and 5) No opinion.

In support of written news releases, 63% of all decision-makers surveyed disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement. Figure 1-A shows that only 27% agreed that VNRs are more effective than written news releases in offering reportable news. This data implies that written news releases are perceived by the decision-makers surveyed to be more effective in offering reportable news than VNRs.

Figure 1-A: All Markets

1) Agree	27%
2) Strongly Agree	0%
3) Disagree	58%
4) Strongly Disagree	7%
5) No opinion	9%



Although 78% of decision-makers in larger media markets disagreed with this statement, only 55% of decision-makers in smaller media markets disagreed with this

statement. Although the study only surveyed a small percentage of newsroom decision-makers in the country, the data suggests that VNRs have more credibility with decision-makers in smaller media markets than larger media markets. Figures 1-B and 1-C display these results.

Figure 1-B: Larger Markets

1) Agree	22%
2) Strongly agree	0%
3) Disagree	78%
4) Strongly disagree	0%
5) No opinion	0%

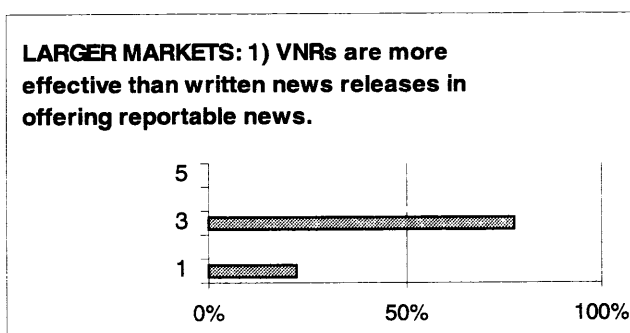
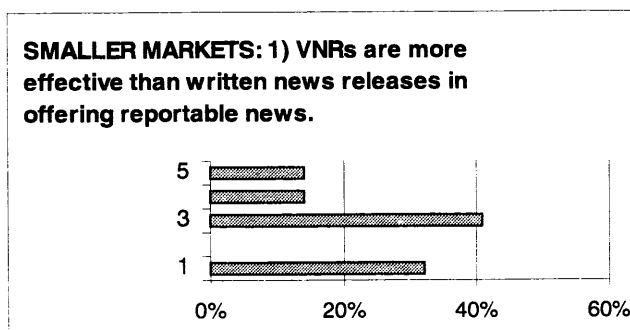


Figure 1-C: Smaller Markets

1) Agree	32%
2) Strongly Agree	0%
3) Disagree	41%
4) Strongly disagree	14%
5) No opinion	14%

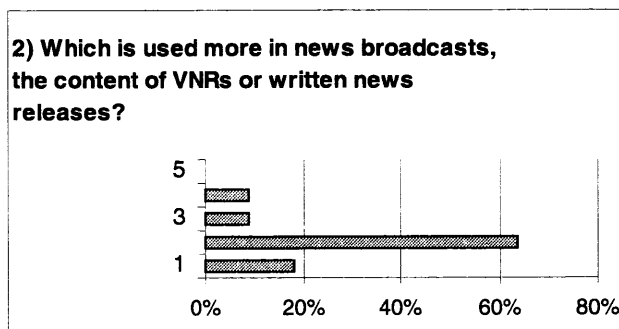


The second question in the survey asked newsroom decision-makers, “Which is used more in news broadcasts, the content of VNRs or written news releases?” Decision-makers had four choices in selecting a response to question number two. These responses were: 1) VNRs, 2) Written news releases, 3) Even, 4) Unsure.

As shown in Figure 2-A, written news releases were looked upon more favorably than VNRs by the newsroom decision-makers surveyed. Sixty-four percent of decision-makers surveyed reported that written news releases were used more often than VNRs in news broadcasts. However, 18% disagreed and reported that the content of VNRs is used more often in news broadcasts than the content of written news releases. This finding is a reflection of the results obtained from the first question of the survey that found 65% of all the newsroom decision-makers surveyed thought written news releases are more effective than VNRs in offering reportable news. Their higher regard for the content of written news releases is consistent with their practice of using more written news releases than VNRs in news broadcasts.

Figure 2-A: Smaller Markets

1) VNRs	16%
2) Written news releases	64%
3) Even	9%
4) Unsure	9%



A higher usage rate of written news releases was more evident in larger media markets as 74% reported to use more written news releases than VNRs in news broadcasts. However, only 55% of decision-makers from smaller media markets used the content of written news releases more often than VNRs in news broadcasts.

Figure 2-B: Larger Markets

- | | |
|--------------------------|-----|
| 1) VNRs | 17% |
| 2) Written news releases | 74% |
| 3) Even | 4% |
| 4) Unsure | 4% |

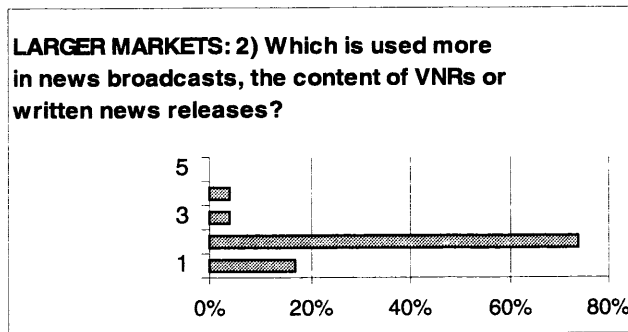
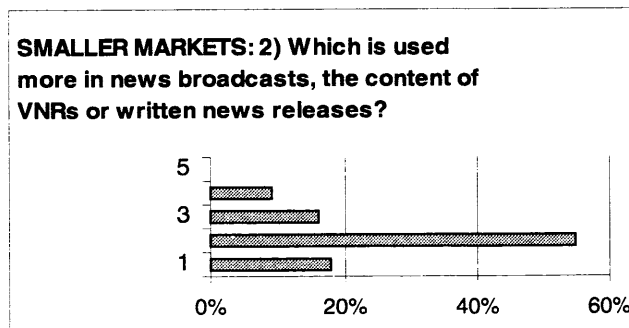


Figure 2-C: Smaller Markets

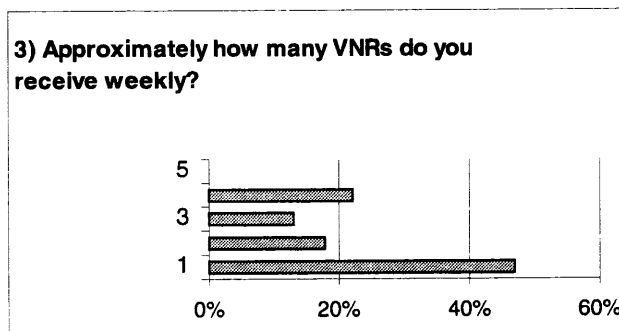
- | | |
|--------------------------|-----|
| 1) VNRs | 18% |
| 2) Written news releases | 55% |
| 3) Even | 16% |
| 4) Unsure | 9% |



The third question in the survey was an attempt to get an account of just how many VNRs television news stations are receiving on a weekly basis. The question read, “Approximately how many VNRs do you receive weekly?” Decision-makers had four responses to select from in answering this survey question. These selections were: 1) 0-5, 2) 6-10, 3) 11-15, and 4) 16 or more. As illustrated in Figure 3-A, the survey found 47% of all the decision-makers surveyed received zero to five VNRs a week. However, 22% reported receiving 16 or more a week.

Figure 3-A: All Markets

1) 0-5	47%
2) 6-10	18%
3) 11-15	13%
4) 16 or more	22%



Stations in smaller media markets reported to receive fewer VNRs than stations in larger media markets. This information implies that companies producing VNRs are sending more VNRs to larger media market television stations. Meanwhile, the survey indicated decision-makers in larger media market television stations were more likely to disagree that VNRs are more effective than written news releases in offering reportable news.

Figure 3-B: Larger Markets

- 1) 0-5 43%
- 2) 6-10 17%
- 3) 11-15 13%
- 4) 16 or more 26%

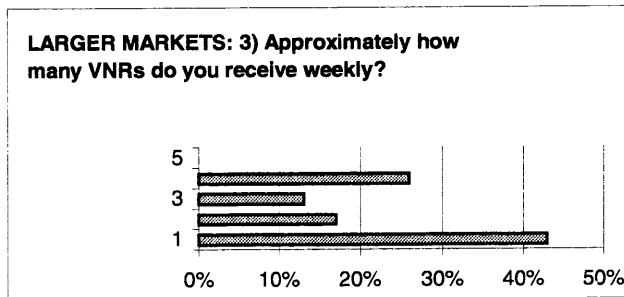
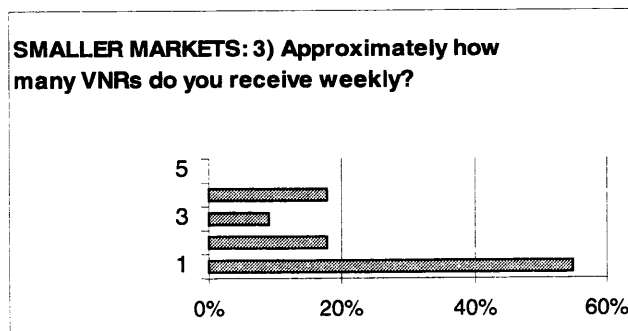


Figure 3-C: Smaller Markets

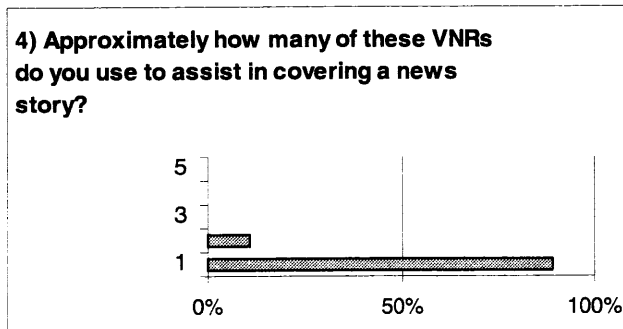
- 1) 0-5 55%
- 2) 6-10 18%
- 3) 11-15 9%
- 4) 16 or more 18%



The fourth question of the survey asked newsroom decision-makers, “Approximately how many of these VNRs do you use to assist in covering a news story?” Decision-makers had four choices to select a response to the fourth question of the survey. The responses were: 1) 0-5, 2) 6-10, 3) 11-15, 4) 16 or more. As shown in Figure 4-A, 89% of all decision-makers surveyed use zero to five of the VNRs received.

Figure 4-A: All Markets

1) 0-5	89%
2) 6-10	11%
3) 11-15	0%
4) 16 or more	0%



There was a similar response between television stations in larger and smaller media markets. Figures 4-B and 4-C show that 87% of larger media markets and 91% of smaller media markets also used zero to five of the VNRs they receive.

Eric Naz of WBFF in Baltimore explained that VNRs are often put aside because it takes too much time to review the content of a VNR as opposed to just reading the content of a written news releases. “We just don’t use VNRs because it takes more time to view them,” said Natz. “A fax (of a written release) is right there.”

Figure 4-B: Larger Markets

1) 0-5	87%
2) 6-10	13%
3) 11-15	0%
4) 16 or more	0%

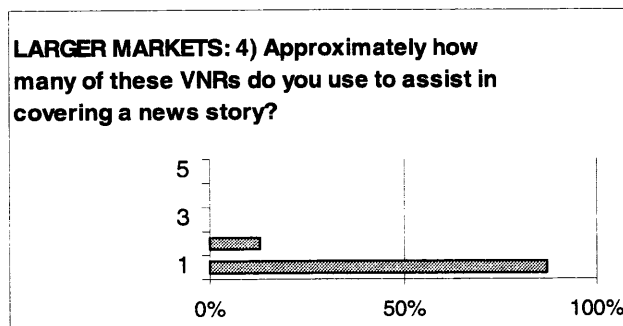
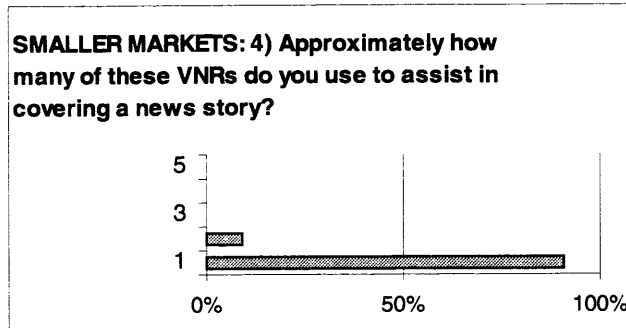


Figure 4-C: Smaller Markets

1) 0-5	91%
2) 6-10	9%
3) 11-15	0%
4) 16 or more	0%



Chuck Westerhide of KNSD in San Diego explained that written news releases are not only more abundant than VNRs, but also more likely to be used for broadcast at his station. “I get more than 1000 faxes a day,” said Westerhide, “but I bet I use one VNR a month.” Wayne Harrison of KMGH in Denver did not look favorably on the number of VNR distributors trying to promote their videos. “We are bombarded with daily phone calls regarding video news releases,” said Harrison. “It’s getting out of hand.”

While VNR usage in news broadcasts was reported to be low, some decision-makers offered reasoning behind why VNRs are used at all. Todd Ward of KFMB in San Diego said, “VNRs are helpful to have when an event is being covered that we can’t get to.” Many decision-makers commented that VNR usage is limited to medical and entertainment pieces. Others such as Tina Myrick of WLWT in Cincinnati indicated a VNR must try to capture a local issue to be used in a broadcast. “In some instances, they (VNRs) are helpful,” said Myrick. “It depends if they can localize the issue.” This supports the claim by VNR producers that VNRs and written news releases both must offer a local news angle to be used in a news broadcast.

The fifth question of the survey asked television newsroom decision-makers how much content of VNRs is used in news broadcasts. The question read, “Do you use a small segment, or ‘wrap,’ of most VNRs or the full content?” Newsroom decision-makers were offered three responses to select from in answering this survey question. The responses were 1) Small segment, 2) Full segment and 3) Don’t use VNR’s.

While only 2% of all the decision-makers surveyed said the full content is used, 70% reported to use only a small segment of the VNRs and the final 28% said they don’t use VNRs at all.

Figure 5-A: All Markets

- 1) Small segment 70%
- 2) Full content 2%
- 3) Don’t use VNRs 28%

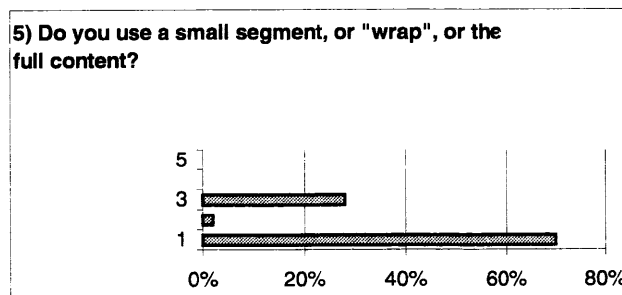


Figure 5-B displays that 74% of decision-makers in larger media markets reported using a small segment of the VNRs they use in a news broadcast. Meanwhile, Figure 5-C shows that 64% in smaller media markets followed the same standard of only airing a small portion of VNRs used. Furthermore, 22% of larger media market decision-makers reported they don’t use VNRs at all while 31% in smaller media markets also do not use VNRs. The only questionable information acquired from this survey question was that 4% of the decision-makers surveyed in the larger media markets reported using the full

content of a VNR. Considering that VNRs are 30 to 90 seconds in length, it would seem unlikely the full content could be used in a news broadcast.

Figure 5-B: Larger Markets

- 1) Small segment 74%
- 2) Full content 4%
- 3) Don't use VNRs 22%

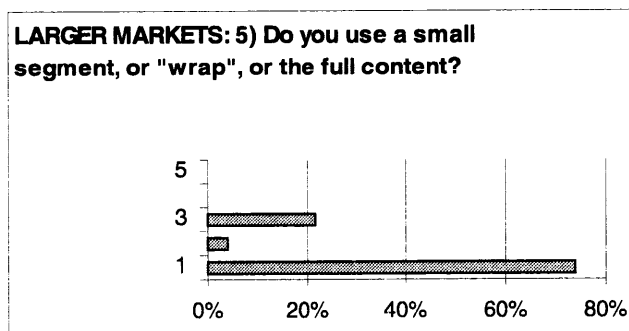
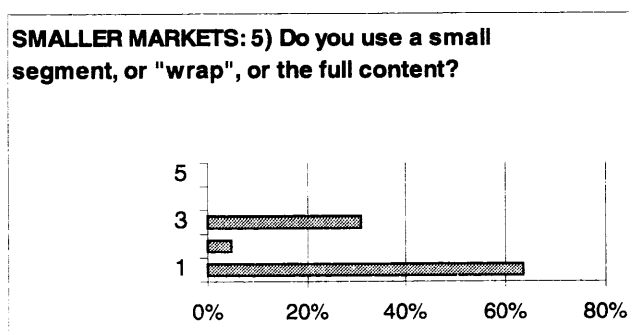


Figure 5-C: Smaller Markets

- 1) Small segment 64%
- 2) Full content 5%
- 3) Don't use VNRs 31%



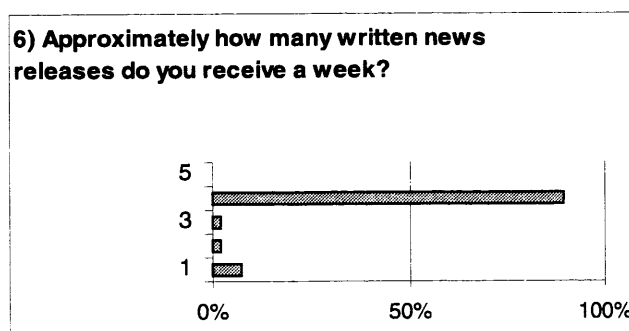
The response of newsroom decision-makers made it clear that the content of VNRs is hardly ever used without being edited down to suit the needs of television news stations. Richard Scott of WPHL in Philadelphia replied, "Video News Releases are helpful in that they provide video material for a story we would cover anyway. We never

run them intact. We always edit them and point out the source when applicable.” Scott emphasized “never” in his response.

The sixth question of the survey was asked to get an estimate of the number of written news releases received by television news stations throughout the country. The question read, “Approximately how many written news releases do you receive a week?” Decision-makers were offered four responses to this question. The responses offered were 1) 0-5, 2) 6-10, 3) 11-15 and 4) 16 or more. As seen in Figure 6-A, 89% of all decision-makers surveyed reported receiving 16 or more VNRs a week.

Figure 6-A: All Markets

1) 0-5	7%
2) 6-10	2%
3) 11-15	2%
4) 16 or more	89%



Figures 6-B and 6-C reflect that stations in larger media markets reported to receive more written news releases than stations in smaller media markets. Ninety-six percent of the stations in larger media markets reported receiving 16 or more written news releases a week. However, only 78% in smaller media markets received 16 or more written news releases a week. Michelle Hedman of KABC in Los Angeles said her station receives “thousands” of written news releases in a week.

Figure 6-B: Larger Markets

- 1) 0-5 0%
- 2) 6-10 0%
- 3) 11-15 4%
- 4) 16 or more 96%

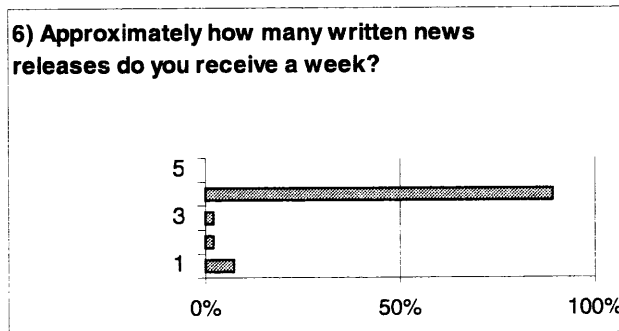
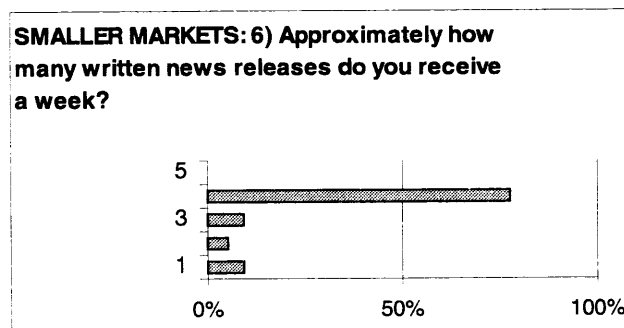


Figure 6-C shows trend was similar in stations in smaller media markets, as 78% of decision-makers reported to receive 16 or more a week. This high volume of written news releases is probably due to the fact that they are inexpensive to produce and distribute. Written news releases are even more cost effective considering the cost of a VNR can range anywhere from \$5,000 to \$20,000.

Figure 6-C: Smaller Markets

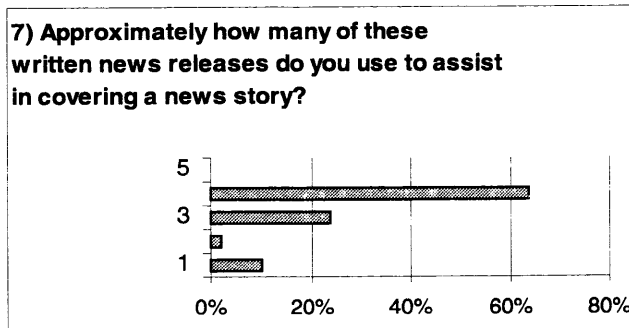
- 1) 0-5 9%
- 2) 6-10 5%
- 3) 11-15 9%
- 4) 16 or more 78%



Question number seven asked television newsroom decision-makers, “Approximately how many of these written news releases do you use to assist in covering a story?” Decision-makers selected from the following responses: 1) 0-5, 2) 6-10, 3) 11-15 and 4) 16 or more. As shown in Figure 7-A, 64% of all the decision-makers surveyed used 16 or more written news releases to assist in covering a story.

Figure 7-A: All Markets

1) 0-5	10%
2) 6-10	2%
3) 11-15	24%
4) 16 or more	64%



The percentage of television newsroom decision-makers that used 16 or more of the written news releases they received to assist in covering a story was similar in both larger and smaller media markets. While 61% of those in larger media markets used 16 or more written news releases to assist in covering a story, 59% of those in smaller media markets used 16 or more written news releases a week.

Figure 7-B: Larger Markets

1) 0-5	4%
2) 6-10	0%
3) 11-15	35%
4) 16 or more	61%

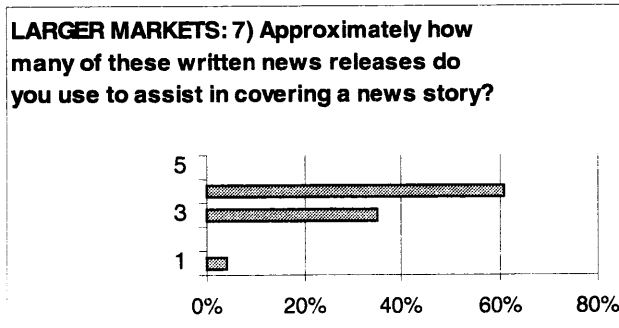
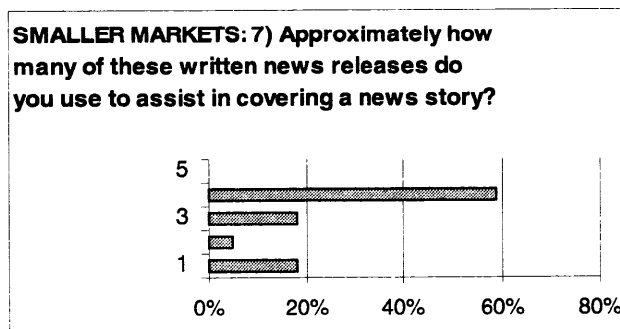


Figure 7-C: Smaller Markets

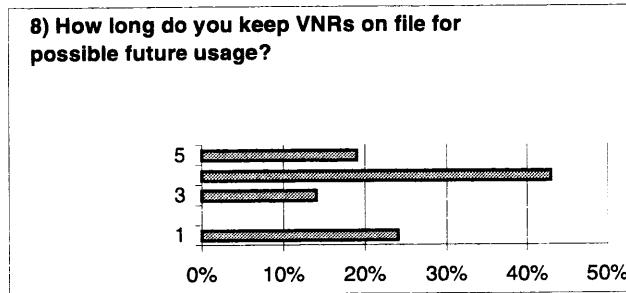
1) 0-5	18%
2) 6-10	5%
3) 11-15	18%
4) 16 or more	59%



The eighth question of the survey asked decision-makers, “How long do you keep VNRs on file for possible future usage?” Decision-makers were offered the following responses to select from to answer this question: 1) 2 weeks, 2) 3 weeks, 3) 1 month 4) I don’t keep VNRs, and 5) Depends on the content. Almost half, 43%, of all newsroom decision-makers indicated they don’t keep VNRs on file for possible future usage.

Figure 8-A: All Markets

- | | |
|-----------------------|-----|
| 1) 2 weeks | 25% |
| 2) 3 weeks | 0% |
| 3) 1 month or more | 13% |
| 4) Don't keep VNRs | 43% |
| 5) Depends on content | 19% |



However, Figures 8-B and 8-C indicate that the percentage of those who don't keep VNRs on file increased slightly to 48% among decision-makers in larger media markets and decreased to 36% in smaller media markets. Approximately one-fifth of all the decision-makers surveyed said they do keep some VNRs on file. The results of the survey indicate that not only are television newsrooms in larger media markets receiving more VNRs than stations in smaller media markets, but they are less likely to keep them on file for possible future usage. Worth noting is the fact that the VNRs that are kept are usually promotional material for entertainment and medical purposes.

Figure 8-B: Larger Markets

- | | |
|-----------------------|-----|
| 1) 2 weeks | 26% |
| 2) 3 weeks | 0% |
| 3) 1 month or more | 4% |
| 4) Don't keep them | 48% |
| 5) Depends on content | 22% |

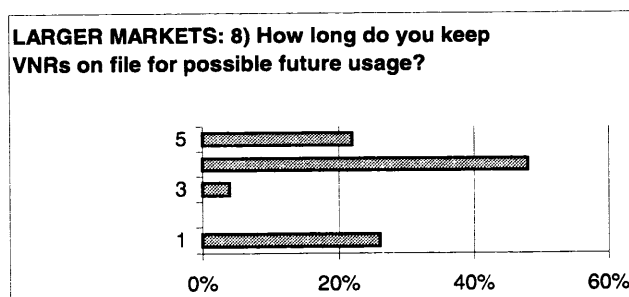
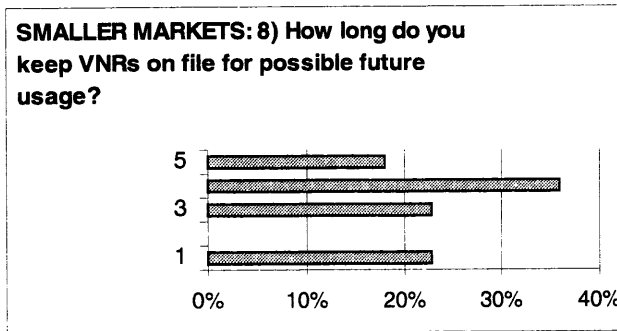


Figure 8-C: Smaller Markets

1) 2 weeks	23%
2) 3 weeks	0%
3) 1 month or more	23%
4) Don't keep them	36%
5) Depends on content	18%

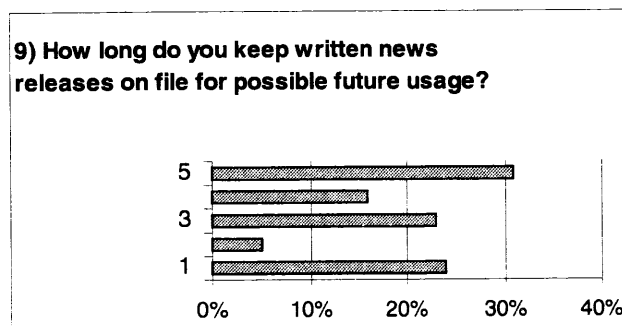


The last question proposed to decision-makers was, “How long do you keep written news releases on file for possible future usage?” Decision-makers could select from the following responses: 1) 2 weeks, 2) 3 weeks, 3) 1 month, 4) Don’t keep written news releases, and 5) Depends on the content.

As shown in Figure 9-A, 51% of all the newsroom decision makers reported to file written news releases from as little as two weeks to one month while another 31% did the same depending on the content of the releases. Overall, 16% reported they do not keep news releases on file.

Figure 9-A: All Markets

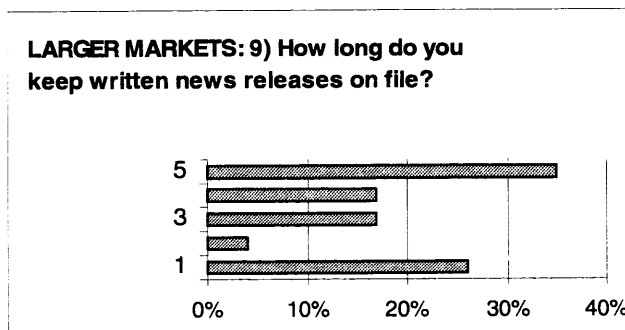
1) 2 weeks	24%
2) 3 weeks	5%
3) 1 month or more	22%
4) Don't keep them	16%
5) Depends on content	31%



The storage of written news releases was surprisingly different in television newsrooms in larger and smaller media markets. Decision-makers in television newsrooms in larger media markets were more likely to keep written news releases in their filing system. In fact, 83% of the larger media market decision-makers reportedly keep written news releases on file anywhere up to one month depending on the content of the release. Figures 9-B and 9-C illustrate these findings.

Figure 9-B: Larger Markets

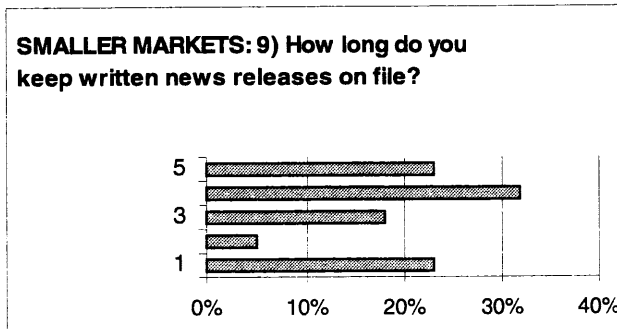
1) 2 weeks	26%
2) 3 weeks	4%
3) 1 month or more	17%
4) Don't keep them	17%
5) Depends on content	35%



However, decision-makers in smaller media markets were less likely to keep written news releases on file for possible future usage. As shown in Figure 9-C, 68% of those surveyed in smaller media markets kept written news releases on file for possible future usage.

Figure 9-C: Smaller Markets

1) 2 weeks	23%
2) 3 weeks	5%
3) 1 month or more	16%
4) Don't keep them	32%
5) Depends on content	23%



CHAPTER V

Summary and Interpretation

The use of Video News Releases by companies trying to promote a product, event or stance on an issue is a popular trend in the public relations industry. Practitioners have taken advantage of technological advances that allow them to communicate their agenda through video instead of using written news releases. Although this survey captures the thoughts and practices of a very small percentage of television newsroom decision-makers, the results of the survey indicate this trend is not necessarily a change for the better.

Significant findings of the survey

Sixty-three percent of all decision-makers disagreed or strongly disagreed that VNRs are more effective than written news releases in offering reportable news. Decision-makers in larger media markets were more likely to disagree or strongly disagree than decision makers in smaller media markets that VNRs are more effective than written news releases in offering reportable news. The fact that more decision-makers in smaller media markets agreed that VNRs are more effective than written news releases in offering reportable news reveals a greater dependence on VNRs in smaller media markers. This pattern coincides with previous studies that suggest a lack of personnel resources in smaller media markets leads to a greater dependency on outside news sources.

The most revealing statistics offered by the decision-makers surveyed was that 65% reported written news releases are used more often in news broadcasts than VNRs. However, only 17% reported VNRs are used more often than written news releases in

news broadcasts. These findings clearly reveal that written news releases are used more often than VNRs in news broadcasts by those surveyed.

As stated in Chapter IV, VNR distributors are sending more VNRs to stations in larger media markets than to smaller media markets. Since the results of this survey state that decision-makers in larger media markets are less likely to use VNRs, the VNR distributors need to evaluate their marketing strategy and send more VNRs to stations in smaller media markets.

However, smaller media market decision-makers sent mixed messages regarding their opinions and usage of VNRs. While decision-makers in smaller media markets were more likely to agree that VNRs are more effective in offering reportable news than their comrades in larger media markets, they were less likely to use VNRs and keep them on file for possible future usage.

Regarding written news releases, larger media market decision-makers reported to receive more written news releases than those in smaller media markets. However, the percentage of written news releases used to assist in covering a news were similar in both larger and smaller media markets.

Review of tentative hypothesis

The findings of this research absolutely disagree with the tentative hypothesis that VNRs are a useful, if not essential, method for public relations practitioners to consider using to promote their organization. Furthermore, the results of the survey disagree with the notion that VNRs are a more useful tool than written news releases in gaining publicity for a company.

The logic behind the tentative hypothesis was the belief that VNRs offer the same amount of information as written news releases but also add a visual element not available in written news releases. Although VNRs unarguably do offer a visual element not available in written news releases, what was not factored was the amount of time it takes newsroom decision-makers to process the information in a VNR. Many decision-makers complained that VNRs take too much time to process while written news releases can be judged for news content immediately as they come into the newsroom on the fax machine.

Unexpected Results

The most unexpected results of the survey were the lack of usage of VNRs in news broadcasts. These results contradict the findings of a survey by Nielsen Media Research on behalf of Medialink. This survey reported 100% of television stations used VNRs in news broadcasts.¹

The lack of usage and unfavorable feelings towards VNRs was not foreseen. The author had a preconceived, and erroneous, notion that VNRs are a larger force in the public relations field than they are. In contrast, decision-makers reported to receive many more written news releases than VNRs but none of those surveyed complained about the volume or content of the written news releases they receive.

Another unexpected finding as a result of the survey was the number of television newsroom decision-makers who reported to use the full content of VNRs as opposed to a small segment, or wrap. Although only 2% of the 45 decision-makers surveyed reported to use the full content of VNRs, one would wonder if it were possible to use the full

¹ "Results from a nationwide telephone survey of 110 TV newsroom decision-makers by Nielsen Media Research on Behalf of Medialink." Medialink Communications.

content of a VNR. Considering VNRs are presented in 30 to 90 second segments, it would not seem feasible a news organization would use the full content of the VNRs because of time constraints.

Further study on VNRs

The study of VNRs could be taken one step further by asking decision-makers what particular VNRs are more likely to be used in a news broadcast. This study could assist companies in deciding if the cost of producing, distributing and tracking a VNR could be eliminated by simply sending a written news release. Many decision-makers reported that most of the VNRs they use in a news broadcast are health or entertainment related.

Another survey that could benefit the public relations industry would be a survey of television newsroom decision-makers asking them to list the reasons why they decide to use or not use VNRs. This could help practitioners prepare VNRs in a fashion more suitable to decision-makers' needs.

Conclusion

It was obvious while completing this survey that television newsroom decision-makers lack one resource in their quest to correlate a deluge of information into a 30-minute news broadcast. This resource is time. Television news is an industry that requires timely decisions and quick information processing. There is a constant pressure of preparing for the next news broadcast.

This is where VNRs have a disadvantage to written news releases. For television newsroom decision-makers to use a VNR, they must first review the notification that a VNR is available through satellite feed. Then they must receive the VNR off the satellite

and take the time to review the content of the VNR. This is a time-consuming demand. Many decision-makers said they are more likely to use a written news release because they can process the information more quickly by looking at the written news release as it comes in over the fax machine and decide immediately if it is newsworthy. The fact that written news releases are more time-efficient than VNRs gives written news releases a distinct advantage. Eric Naz of WBFF in Baltimore explains, “We just don’t use VNRs because it takes more time to view them. A fax is right there.”

Another complaint by decision-makers regarding VNRs is the content. Many complained that the content of many VNRs borders on advertising. As stated in Chapter II, even professionals involved in the production and distribution of VNRs agree that many VNRs have a tendency to be biased and lack objectivity.

In conclusion, if VNRs are going to become a more viable option for companies to use when trying to gain publicity, they must make VNRs more time-efficient for the gatekeepers. Furthermore, VNRs producers must concentrate on making the content of the VNRs more newsworthy, objective and less like an advertisement.

APPENDIX

Survey Questions

The following questions were presented to television newsroom decision makers at 45 television news stations in the United States. The survey was conducted over the telephone.

1) VNRs are more effective than written news releases in offering reportable news.

- 1) I agree
- 2) I strongly agree
- 3) I disagree
- 4) I strongly disagree
- 5) No opinion

2) The content of VNRs is used more consistently than written news releases in news broadcasts?

- 1) I agree
- 2) I strongly agree
- 3) I disagree
- 4) I strongly disagree
- 5) No opinion

3) Approximately how many VNRs do you receive weekly?

- 1) 0 – 5
- 2) 6 – 10
- 3) 11-15
- 4) 16 or more

4) How many of these VNRs do you use as a vehicle to covering a story?

- 1) 0-5
- 2) 6-10
- 3) 11-15
- 4) 16 or more

5) Do you use a small segment, or “wrap” of most VNRs or the full content?

- 1) A small segment
- 2) Full content
- 3) I don't use VNRs

- 6) Approximately how many written news releases do you receive in a week?
- 1) 0-5
 - 2) 6-10
 - 3) 11-15
 - 4) 16 or more
- 7) How many of these written news releases do you use a vehicle to covering a story?
- 1) 0-5
 - 2) 6-10
 - 3) 11-15
 - 4) 16 or more
- 8) How long do you keep VNRs on file for possible future usage?
- 1) 2 weeks
 - 2) 3 weeks
 - 3) 1 month or more
 - 4) I don't keep them
 - 5) Depends on the content
- 9) How long do you keep written news releases on file?
- 1) 2 weeks
 - 2) 3 weeks
 - 3) 1 month or more
 - 4) I don't keep them
 - 5) Depends on the content

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